

Cleon: an unscrupulous and vulgar rabble-rouser?

Adam Lomax

Cleon was one of the most prominent politicians and democratic statesmen in Athenian politics during the fifth century B.C. — a determined leader who worked hard for the well-being of Athens. Despite his distinguished leadership, however, Cleon's career was flooded with controversy. He encountered countless accusations about his style of speaking in court and his political decisions. How much of what is said about him is true? This winning entry for the Gladstone Prize tries to answer this question by looking at historical events, historical background, and references to Cleon from other sources.

Early years: Cleon the statesman

Cleon first came to notice in the late 430s, during the downfall of Pericles' popularity. At the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles had not followed the aggressive policy of confrontation with the Spartans that others had hoped for. On top of his reluctance to fight the Peloponnesian invaders in 431 B.C., Pericles had also led an unsuccessful trip to the Peloponnese in 430, and the city of Athens was soon to be struck by a mystery epidemic, most likely a plague, which would kill thousands of citizens. All these things led to Pericles being hated by aristocrats and fellow politicians. Despite the hatred so clearly expressed by the aristocrats and politicians, it was in fact a young politician from a middle-class family who led the campaign opposing the Periclean regime: Cleon. Cleon accused Pericles of maladministration of public money, for which he was later found guilty, fined, and removed from office.

Regarding the financial accusations of Pericles, Plutarch writes that 'the name prefixed to the accusation was Cleon'. Clearly, Cleon led the campaign to overthrow Pericles; it is obvious that he was the head of the organization. But why Cleon? Why would any one of dozens of aristocratic politicians with noble ancestry and a distinguished reputation make way for a rather unknown politician from a middle-class family with no noble ancestry, one of the so-called 'new politicians'? (Cleon's father Cleanetus owned a tannery.)

The answer is unknown. It is possible, however, that it was due to Cleon's distinctly vigorous and determined style

of opposing Pericles that he won attention and favour of his colleagues. It is this type of behaviour that would make him famous and earn him a notorious reputation among the citizens of Athens and spark several hostilities with colleagues. It is possible that Cleon used this behaviour as a way to get attention and recognition as a young, rising politician. Unlike other politicians, Cleon had no financial or social advantages to help him with his career and its potential and so he created this unusual behaviour as a way to get attention. It would be unfair to call him 'unscrupulous' for his prosecution of Pericles: for all we know, it was what most politicians were doing at the time.

Following Pericles' death in 429, Cleon sought to take Pericles' place as leader of the democracy. Following his ascension he followed a more aggressive policy towards fighting the Spartans, in contrast to Pericles' more peaceable approach. He was also able to repair the economic damage done by Pericles, by trebling the city's income, which could then be used in aid of the Peloponnesian War. Overall, he was an effective leader who contributed in many ways to the wellbeing of Athens.

The Mytilenean Revolt

Another controversial moment in Cleon's life was after the Mytilenean Revolt. In 428, the Spartan army convinced the people of Lesbos (a Greek island located in the north-eastern Aegean Sea) to rebel against Athens and in return they would support the people of the island. However, following the revolt of the people of Lesbos, the Spartans offered no support

and the Lesbians were left to fight Athens by themselves. By 427, order had been restored by the Athenians, and the Assembly had to decide how to deal with the rebels. Cleon once again showed his more provocative side when he declared that all men of Mytilene (the capital of Lesbos) should be killed and that their wives and children should be sold into slavery. For twenty-first century readers, this will confirm the rumours that Cleon really was a savage, merciless demagogue. However, Cleon was not the only one who thought this decision was appropriate; in fact the decision was accepted by the whole Assembly. To Cleon and the other Athenians, the punishment fitted the crime. When the Lesbians revolted, they had broken their oath of loyalty to Athens. Even Diodotus, the politician who argued that the people be spared, admitted it was a just punishment. In the end, however, after a heated discussion between Cleon and Diodotus, the Assembly finally agreed to spare the citizens of Lesbos.

Personal enmities: Thucydides

Due to his controversial decisions, Cleon was often the subject of much criticism (despite the beneficial results he got for Athens). One of his better-known critics is the historian Thucydides, who refers to him as a violent character. In Cleon's first appearance in the text, Thucydides describes him as 'the most drastic of the citizens'. He also refers to him as a 'demagogue' (or 'rabble-rouser'), and perhaps suggests that he is a tyrant: 'I have often thought on previous occasions that democracy is incapable of running an empire'.

As well as being violent and vulgar, Thucydides portrays him as cowardly. One example is the debate with Nicias over the Battle of Sphacteria in book 4:

But when he became aware Nicias really was prepared to hand over his command, he began to back-track and said that it was not he but Nicias who was general.

Another is Cleon's death during the battle at Amphipolis:

Cleon himself, who from the start

had never intended to stand his ground, fled immediately and was killed by a peltast from Myrcinus.

The common attacks on Cleon, both as a demagogue and as a coward could be considered unjust, or at least exaggerated. Certainly, the unsympathetic way in which Thucydides describes his death shows a hostility that helps to contextualize the way in which Cleon is referred to in other chapters.

There are several reasons why Thucydides might have attacked Cleon:

- He was prejudiced against poorer families: Thucydides was from a noble family, whereas Cleon's family owned a tannery.
- He was a big supporter of Pericles and his methods of leadership, and was disappointed to see him replaced by those who did not share his style of leadership.
- He is acting out of vengeance towards Cleon.

Of these possible reasons for slandering Cleon, the first is hard to substantiate. The most likely reasons are the last two. Thucydides often shows support for Pericles in the way that he rules. He often conveys Pericles as an excellent leader of men. As he says in book 2, 'his power was in his distinguished reputation and his intellect, and was patently incorruptible'. He proceeds to express his dislike of the way in which his successors govern: 'they allowed personal accusations made for pursuit of political supremacy to blunt the effectiveness of the military, and for the first time there was factional discord in the city'.

The third reason is also likely. In 423 Thucydides was exiled for military incompetence at Amphipolis, and the man most likely to have exiled him was Cleon. It is thus reasonable to suppose that Thucydides' writing is prejudiced; we can conclude that the references to Cleon in his book are exaggerated, and do not do Cleon justice.

Personal enmities: Aristophanes

Another famous enemy of Cleon is the Greek playwright Aristophanes. Cleon is the victim of many satirical and outlandish jokes by Aristophanes, particularly in *Knights* and *Wasps*. In *Knights* (performed in 424 B.C.), Aristophanes tells the story of a vulgar slave, 'Paphlagonian', who continuously takes credit for deeds done by other slaves in the house and licks the boot of his master Demos. The play begins with two slaves called Nicias and Demosthenes who complain about how unfair and sleazy this new slave is being. This play is an obvious attack on Cleon.

The play draws countless satirical analogies with contemporary politics. For example, the name of the slave's master is

Demos, or 'People' in Greek. The area in which he lives is called Pnyx (the place where the Athenian assembly was held near the Acropolis). Paphlagonian's manipulation of his master, Demos, is a barely veiled allusion to Cleon's manipulation of Athens. Paphlagonian also takes credit for deeds done by other slaves. This reflects Cleon taking the credit due to the generals Nicias and Demosthenes (also the names of the protagonist slaves in the play) for the victory at Sphacteria.

In *Wasps* (performed in 422), meanwhile, Aristophanes criticizes Cleon for creating an ineffective jury system for public trials. He also claims that Cleon moulds the old jurymen into his own image because they become merciless and savage towards defendants during trial.

It is not unusual to read a play where Aristophanes satirizes somebody famous through personal jokes. His attacks on Cleon, however, are exceptionally brutal and persistent. Did Cleon do something personally offensive to Aristophanes, to make him retaliate in this way? In 425 B.C., Aristophanes gave a performance of his now lost play *Babylonians* in front of foreigners. In the play he ridiculed the policy and institutions of Athens, which seems to have greatly angered Cleon. As a result, Cleon prosecuted Aristophanes and the producers for this performance which had ridiculed Athens in front of foreigners. This is undoubtedly the main reason for Aristophanes' hostility, and the explanation for his satirical plays that exaggerate Cleon's behaviour.

Despite his notorious reputation and controversial behaviour, Cleon was probably an effective leader. He was determined to improve the state of Athens by regaining land lost in the Peloponnesian War and repairing economic problems left by predecessors. The criticisms levelled at him by Thucydides and Aristophanes are exaggerated, thanks to personal prejudice.

Adam Lomax is a student in the sixth form at Tonbridge School.